

## Boekbesprekings / Book reviews



JANE CARRUTHERS. *Melton Prior: war artist in Southern Africa, 1895-1900*. The Brenthurst Press: Johannesburg, 1987. 279 pp. Illus. R180,00 (exclusive), ISBN 0 909079 33 1. (Luxury edition: R540,00 (exclusive), ISBN 0 909079 34 X).

Melton Prior (1845-1910) achieved a considerable reputation as a war artist during the high tide of *fin de siècle* British imperialism. This superb new Brenthurst Press publication, which maintains the impressive standards of production, design, typography and layout set by its predecessors in the series, places some of Prior's work in Southern Africa in historical perspective.

Eighty-six of the 95 sketches by this artist in Mr Harry Oppenheimer's Brenthurst Collection are magnificently reproduced. Jane Carruthers, of the History Department of the University of South Africa, provides a succinct analysis of Prior's life and times, together with useful historical insights into the events connected with the sketches, as well as comments on the drawings themselves.

The drawings, which were acquired by the Brenthurst Library from a London bookseller in the mid-1960s, have been well grouped in five chapters, each concerning important aspects of the history of Southern Africa during the last five years of the 19th century. The first section, focused on the Witwatersrand and its rapidly developing gold mining industry in the mid-1890s, provides an effective introduction to the four subsequent chapters. The Jameson Raid occurred while Prior was on the Witwatersrand and this ill-fated venture and its aftermath is the theme of another chapter. The rebellion in Matabeleland in 1896 and two aspects of the Anglo-Boer War — the siege of Ladysmith and Lord Roberts's advance from Bloemfontein to Pretoria — constitute the remaining themes of Prior's Southern African experiences which receive attention.

In 1868 Prior began working for *The Illustrated London News*, which had been established 26 years earlier. The author regards Prior as a 'typical' Victorian. She informs us that he had middle-class origins, that his father was an artist and he himself studied art. One would have liked to have had more information about his life and background before he began his association with the weekly journal. Prior's subsequent career and art were largely determined by the journal which employed him and the violent events of his age but although some revealing insights into his personality are provided, he remains a somewhat shadowy figure. From his first commission when he was sent to the West Coast of Africa during the Ashanti war in 1873, until his last, when he visited the Far East in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese war, he travelled to various parts of the world, graphically recording incidents of unrest and war, particularly, but not exclusively, those emanating from British imperial policy.

As is pointed out, Melton Prior was not a great artist, but he sketched "as a recording medium where others used words". He was observant and many of his drawings were characterized by prominent vertical and horizontal lines emphasizing certain features, the use of contrasts in terms of light and shade, as well as of divergent figurative groups and aspects of architecture and landscape, in a sketch. Some of his Witwatersrand mining sketches executed in 1896 are surprisingly rigid and static compared to most of his other drawings.



Prior was in his element in depicting crowd scenes with considerable attention to detail, in which he was able to convey movement, facial expression, drama and a vivid visual evocation of manners, customs and style, which words cannot quite capture. Some of the best sketches of this type are 'The preliminary examination of Reform Committee', 'A false alarm in Buluwayo (sic)', 'Battle of Elandsplaagte — dressing the wounded in the field', 'The surrender of Kroonstad', and the drawings showing Roberts's occupation of Pretoria. Many of the drawings romanticize war, but the horrors are also depicted, particularly in the sketch of the burial of Dr Jameson's dead with the corpses lying side by side in a rough trench-grave (which was not published in the *Illustrated London News*), the stark realism of the Devon, Manchester and Gordon Regiments charging the enemy's guns at Elands-

laagte, the panic-stricken people in the Ladysmith railway station being shelled and the Boer ambush at Koorn Spruit. More than once, but especially in the battle of Caesar's camp sketch, a further striking impact is achieved by depicting the mass impetus and apparent loss of individuality of an almost mob-like charge in battle, by hardly showing any faces at all. A careful study of all these sketches mentioned, as well as of at least two others which cannot be left unmentioned — the one showing 'Two Kaffir boys from the Boer lines' being held up and the 'Arrival of Sir Alfred Milner at Bloemfontein railway station', with a little dog stealing the scene — is extremely rewarding and reveal a subtlety in Prior's work for which he has perhaps received insufficient credit. Perhaps too, his drawings were not quite as narrowly concentrated and lacking in critical comment as first impressions would suggest.

Some of the issues behind certain events and incidents depicted by Prior remain the subject of historical controversy. Jane Carruthers, who consulted a wide range of works, is aware of the areas of controversy and of the findings of recent research. She is a worthy guide, who is generally so sure-footed in traversing difficult terrain that it would be carping to dwell on some minor slips. However, one may be allowed the following observations: her treatment of Victorian imperialism may not be as sharp as it could have been; some of her remarks concerning the nature of the Witwatersrand gold mines could perhaps have been more carefully phrased; her treatment of the causes of the Jameson Raid does less than full justice to a very intricate affair; and believe it or not, a person in a Brenthurst publication (the Rev. H.J. Batts on p.252) is actually given a wrong initial!

Jane Carruthers's text will add to readers' understanding of Prior, his art and his Southern African experiences. Her notes and bibliography will stimulate many people to read other books on the period.

The Brenthurst Press is to be commended for making these valuable visual documents available in such a magnificent format.

S.B. SPIES  
University of South Africa



H. MEIRING. *Early Johannesburg: its buildings and its people* (teks deur G-M. van der Waal en W. Grütter in samewerking met A. Jonker). Human en Rousseau: Kaapstad en Pretoria, 1986. 143 pp. Geïll. R29,95 (eksklusief). ISBN 0 7981 1456 8.

Hierdie is een van die waardevolste boeke wat gedurende Johannesburg se eeuftesjaar verskyn het. Dit is saamgestel uit sketse deur die argitek Hannes Meiring, met teks deur G-M. van der Waal en Wilhelm Grütter. Meiring se uitmuntende sketse laat die boek lewe, veral vanweë hul intieme en persoonlike weergawe van taferle en geboue wat bykans verlore gegaan het.

Die boek het sy ontstaan gehad in 'n reeks wat in die loop van 1985 weekliks onder die titel "Ou Johannesburg" in *Beeld* verskyn het. Die reeks tekeninge met byskrifte is saamgevat en met uitgebreide teksbywerking as 'n eeuftespublikasie uitgegee.

Deur die inleiding, getitel "El Dorado", maak die leser kennis met hierdie Suid-Afrikaanse wêreldstad, in die omgang bekend as die 'Goudstad'. Die Swartmense noem dit 'Egol' maar die Spanjaarde, so beweer die skrywers, het dit El Dorado gedoopt — 'n sprokieswêreld getower uit goud. En daarom vorm die verhaal van goud die sentrale tema van die boek.

In die vyf hoofstukke wat volg, word beskryf hoe spogvoorstede mettertyd op die plase Randjeslaagte, Doornfontein, Langlaagte, Klipfontein en Syferfontein verries het. Ook die ontstaan van agterbuurtes in dié snel-ontwikkelende, polsende stad kom onverbloemd aan die beurt. Daar word vertel van die hartseer en ontgogeling wat soms gekom het en die gevolglike verval van die prag en praal in voorstede soos Parktown en Doornfontein.

Selfs die beskrywing van onderhandelinge wat plaasgevind het met die verkoop van woonerwe, winkels en sake-ondernemings maak bo verwagting interessante leesstof omdat dit kort en bondig maar tog vol menslike drama is. Aandag word ook gegee aan 'n groot verskeidenheid gebeure wat 'n invloed op die ontwikkeling van die Goudstad gehad het: oorloë en stakings, sport en kultuur.

Maar dit is na die sketse wat 'n mens telkens wil terugkeer omdat dit met soveel sensitiwiteit uitgevoer is en die kunstenaar se meevoeling met en waardering vir 'n vorige era adem. Dit is asof daar 'n intieme verhouding bestaan tussen die kunstenaar en oorspronklike inwoners van die geboue wat hy in sy illustrasies uitbeeld. Deur sy fyn en sorgvuldige detail (in voorwerpe soos hekke, hoekies, traliewerk of verskuilde plantegroei) nooi Meiring die leser as't ware saam op 'n sprokiesbesoek aan vervloë tye in Johannesburg. Sodoende het hy op kenmerkende wyse geboue verewig wat moontlik in die nabye toekoms deur die hamers van ontwikkelaars platgeslaan en uitgewis kan word.